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THE EARLY MUNICIPAL RECORD OF GRANDE PRAIRIE

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I am greatly flattered, and ordinarily I would be more than delighted to contribute as requested, an historical sketch of the town of Grande Prairie. However, it is some twelve years since I was last in the Peace River country and I am therefore compelled to trust to a none too trustworthy memory.

Twenty-two years ago, I was on the Edson Trail. My first view of Grande Prairie was obtained on an exceedingly cold day in February, 1914. The hamlet, as I believe it was called at that time, consisted of a half dozen or more buildings, some of log and some of rough lumber construction. The population of the hamlet was, I should judge from 25 to 50 souls. I was told at the time that altogether, and this is of importance, there were some five thousand settlers in the Grande Prairie district. That was in the year 1914. These people were not homesteaders in the ordinary sense. Their coming had not been made possible by Government grants or other forms of assistance. On the other hand, they were almost entirely people who had been successful elsewhere, and were willing to invest that capital, together with a portion at least of the best years of their lives in the building of a last great west. They were necessarily people of means, because before starting on the adventure, they were fully advised that they could expect or hope for nothing other than a continual outlay with no compensating income,

for a period of at least several years.

It was people of this type, and of this category, that comprised the trek into the Grande Prairie country that commencing in 1908 continued through until 1916.

During the two weeks spent on the inward journey over the Edson Trail. I never at any time remember being out of sight of a pioneer's outfit. And these were usually complete outfits. Full lines of machinery; livestock, household equipment including in several instances at least, pianos, gramophones, and other contraptions that go to the making of genuine homes. I well remember one outfit that was loaded with hardwood that was designed to become the flooring of Cecil (Deep-Creek) Johnston's log home midway between Grande Prairie and the Smoky.

The community thus established, was, it should be remembered, to all practical purposes entirely cut off by a two hundred and fifty miles of wilderness of alternating hills and muskeg from the outside world for at least eight months of each and every year. Mail got through by pack horses with fair regularity throughout the year it is true, but the freight outfit that got caught on the trail by an early spring thaw was stuck and stayed stuck until the white blanket of winter again settled over the land. The isolation from outside influences and outside connection, thus existent, lent itself to the creation of a community spirit and community brotherhood, that has had few counter-parts in American history.

But while I have said that the community was established without Government or other outside assistance, the five thousand or more settlers who comprised the community did have one very definite promise, and it was on this that they based their faith and their hopes. They were promised direct and early transportation facilities to both Edmonton and the Coast. This has been and may be disputed but it is nevertheless true. In 1913 the Canadian North-Western Railway was under construction from Edmonton northwesterly. The end of steel was in the vicinity of Whitecourt. A cache for bridge builders was housed at the Big Smoky just 25 miles east of Grande Prairie. More important still, the Government of the Province of Alberta had guaranteed the bonds of the Canadian Northwestern to the tune of $20,000 per miles for the express purpose of carrying the steel to and through Grande Prairie to the B.C. Boundary. Furthermore the bonds so guaranteed were actually sold. The fact that the money was used improperly for other purposes has of course become history. The point I am endeavoring to make is that, even at that early date, the settlers of the Grande Prairie country had a definite promise of a direct outlet. The Pacific and Great Eastern Railway was likewise under construction under like guarantees, and with these two undertakings then underway, settlement of the country proceeded. With the outbreak of war both undertakings were abandoned.

While the foregoing may appear irrelevant to an historical sketch of the town of Grande Prairie itself, such is

not the case as those two (since defunct) railway undertakings very definitely affected the trend of settlement. Lands adjacent to the Canadian Northwestern right-of-way were usually the first to be homesteaded. Consequently, early settlement was to an extent confined to a comparatively narrow strip extending from the Smoky north-westerly. The settlers, so located, looked with confidence to the enjoyment of direct rail facilities with both eastern and western outlets at a then early date. It was this justifiable faith that led to the plotting of the Grande Prairie town site. Located on the C.N. right-of-way, midway between the Smoky and the brush country to the west, it became the heart of the then settled district. More than one saw-mill outfit, two sets of flour milling equipment, as well as the presses of the HERALD and FRONTIER SIGNAL came over the Trail prior to 1914, and all contributed materially to the building of a frontier centre. Railway development was regarded as being merely delayed rather than abandoned. However while both the Canadian Northwestern and the Pacific and Great Eastern were inactive, the MacArthur line was pushing steadily northward, circling and winding to tap timber berths it is true, but generally progressing in the direction of the Peace. A branch intended at the time to reach the B.C. boundary was constructed westerly from McLennan but actually only got as far as Spirit River. The whole of the line including this branch completely circumvented the Grande Prairie district. Purely as a temporary measure a

branch of this branch was extended southerly from Spirit River to Grande Prairie, reaching the latter point in 1916.

The entry of this branch from the North was hailed with delight. But even then there were those who viewed this development with misgiving. While affording temporary and welcome relief, it was obvious that the needs of the country could not thereby be adequately served. And it was equally obvious that the entry of this branch of a branch indicated indefinite postponment of either or both of the other projects that would have permanently solved the transportation problem of the Grande Prairie country.

However, the entry of this branch from the north (instead of the south) brought with it a boom. Lots changed hands readily at fancy figures in the years of 1916 to 1918. The hamlet became incorporated as a village. J.B. Taft, who then operated a meat packing plant, a butcher shop, and real estate office, became the first reeve. His office was used as the village office, and A.C. McEachern became the first secretary-treasurer. During the term of office of Mr. Taft, the first civic improvements were undertaken. The first municipal well was put down, and I believe continues in use. A chemical engine was obtained, and a start made in the construction of plank walks.

In 1916, a new council, consisting of the late H.F. Hall as reeve, with Geo. Crummy and R. L. Michaelis as Councillors took office. At this time the writer returned to Grande Prairie from Lake Saskatoon and took over the office of

secretary-treasurer from which Mr. McEachern had resigned. At this date, Chas. Spencer was chairman of the School Board and with A.M. Hunskor and J. Lambert as Trustees, was planning the erection of the splendid school building that you have today. This it should be noted, was the first building of permanent type to be erected in the Peace River country. As secretary of the School Board which office I also took over, I cannot but recall the untiring effort and personal sacrifice made by Mr. Spencer in furtherance of this project. The plans and specifications of the building were of his own drawing and he personally supervised the erection of the work without hope of reward other than that which comes from the knowledge of public service faithfully performed.

Members of the Village Council were equally untiring. Day after day, R.L. Michaelis himself rode the grader, and gave to the ratepayers a splendid system of streets and much needed drainage. The laying out of the "Boulevard" was one of his works. George Crummy watched the purse strings, and could be counted on to exercise the necessary restraint at exactly the right time. The kindly and genial personality of the late Herb Hall, fitted him well for the Reeveship and was greatly instrumental in cementing the then existing factions into one little body intent on advancing the welfare of the community. Meanwhile, and following the entry of the railway several rival townsites had sprung up and were making a bid for leadership. Sensing this the Village Council realized that Grande Prairie must step boldly forward to ensure its future as the distributing centre of the district. This

attitude was adopted. Desirable improvements were made without hesitation. Consequently the name of Grande Prairie became synonymous with progress. Fire protection was urgently demanded. Insurance rates had become ruinously high. It was suggested than an elevated tank be secured. But it was found that the cost of such was thirty-five thousand dollars f.o.b. Pittsburg a sum entirely beyond the means of the village. As an alternative it was decided to purchase a fire engine which would pump direct from the well and deliver water through a line of hose. Difficulty then arose in securing authority to issue the necessary debentures, and the Council despatched me to Edmonton to interview the Utility Commission in this connection. While there and so doing, I learned that the city had an elevated tank on 104th street which at the time was not in use. On being advised of this by wire council authorized me to submit an offer to the city. As a result the tank was dismantled and re-erected in Grande Prairie at a total cost inclusive of water mains, of something less than fourteen thousand dollars. In addition to enabling us to secure a reduction in insurance rates, the new fire protective system repeatedly saved the village from destruction during the ensuing two years, and at the same time lent to the town an atmosphere of permanence and stability, rearing as it did to its towering height among what was then but a conglomeration of shacks. Grande Prairie thus became the only community in the north offering anything in the way of fire protection to the prospective merchant or wholesaler.

About this time a move was got under way to have the village incorporated as a town. The Government was petitioned accordingly, and a census which I took under the scrutiny of an Inspector from the Department of Municipal Affairs, disclosed a population of 1040, a surplus of a scant 40 over the legal requirement. An election for Town Council was shortly thereafter held, and in June, 1917, R.L. Michaelis took office as Grande Prairie's first mayor. I am sorry I can't recall the names of the six Councillors elected at the time. A year earlier steps were taken to incorporate a Board of Trade. In securing incorporation under Dominion Charter we included in the area represented by the organization, the whole of the Grande Prairie Land District and so became the only official recognized body of the kind in the country. Whether A.W. Pentland or Jack Thomson was the first President or not I cannot remember, but both filled the office with energy and enthusiasm during those early days, and contributed greatly to the prestige of Grande Prairie.

Meanwhile, the citizens had determined to have electric light. A meeting was held in a little house which I occupied. A company was there formed under the Presidency of A.R. McMillan, stock was sold locally and after many disappointments a plant was finally installed and ultimately passed to the ownership of the town. In 1920 the fire apparatus and town office which had been housed in the building owned by Jimmy Oliver was removed to the Town hall which was erected in that year and continues to serve the purpose.

During the years of which I write and until 1922, we had our ups and downs. During all of those years,1914 to 1922, a vigorous and continuous fight was waged for the rail facilities that were and are so necessary and desirable. I know that the fight has been carried on with equal or greater vigour since. But personally, I felt (and wrote) that joint ownership of the E.D. & B.C. Ry. would spell death to the just claims of the people of town and district. I still think I was right.

In conclusion permit me to say that it has afforded me real pleasure to recall the associations I was privileged to enjoy during the years under review. As an occasional reader of the HERALD I know that now as then the citizens of Grande Prairie afford an unequalled example of progressiveness and faith. May I join in the sincere hope that these will yet bear fruit.